

Richard Engelhardt: Roving Scholar/Diplomat for UNESCO

Katell Guiziou, who did part of her research work at SPAFA before obtaining her Master of Law in International Cultural Relations and Exchange (*Droit des Relations et des Echanges Culturels Internationaux*) from the Institut d'etudes Politiques (Lyon, France), recently had a chat with Richard Engelhardt about UNESCO and his role as its Regional Advisor for Culture (Asia and the Pacific)

Richard feels totally at ease with both strangers and acquaintances. As UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture, you do not discover a mere “advisor” but an articulate, humorous person and a brilliant and motivated advocate for all things cultural in the Asia-Pacific region. The heaps of paperwork and documents that fill his office testify to the numerous cases he is involved in. Hidden behind the piles of paper you will discover numerous proofs of his achievements, most notably an ornately framed certificate bestowing upon Richard the coveted title of *Commandeur de l'Ordre Royal du Cambodge* which had been awarded to him by H.M King Norodom Sihanouk (Preah Bat Samdej Preah Norodom Sihanouk Varman) in recognition of his services in the preservation of the Angkor Monuments of Cambodia.

When relating his four years (from 1991 to 1995) as UNESCO Representative and Head of the UNESCO Office in Cambodia, Richard reflected on the challenges of being a diplomat responsible for the implementation of the Cambodian peace process, where the conservation of Angkor was



Richard Engelhardt

“the lynchpin for the success of the entire peace process” because it was the first major topic the four contending parties were all willing to discuss.

The International Safeguarding Campaign for Angkor which Richard launched in 1991 was an integral part of that process, not only for diplomatic reasons, but also because it represented “an important symbol for nation-building after the civil war, and it was also clear that it was the only immediate source of international foreign exchange for Cambodia”.

Richard is an outstanding scholar in the field of Asian culture and heritage, with degrees from Yale and Harvard universities. He has held visiting lectureships in universities in Hawaii, Japan and Thailand, and publishes numerous articles and books (including *The Ethno-Archaeology of Maritime Communities in the Southeast Asian Archipelago* and *Two Thousand Years of Engineering Genius on the Angkor Plain*). He is, however, more related to the species of 'globe-trotter' rather than bookworm and likes traveling in space as much as in time. He has been 'migrating' since childhood: every summer from school in Boston to his summer house in Minnesota, where he was born. He was raised in an intellectual family, notably by his grandmother, a historian who studied the role of women in the settlement of the Americas; and his grandfather who was a pioneer in the environmental movement. Encouraged by his family, the young Richard would devour history books from the large family library; and then follow the trail of dinosaur bones and Indian arrowheads.



Richard explains his interest in prehistoric history from his initial eagerness to know the origins of "native American culture" and, indeed, the very origin of "history itself". At university, he studied Asian history, and traveled to Asia many times because "it was the place to come face-to-face with history". He first came to Asia as a teenager when he made up his own exchange programme to stay for a year in Nakhon Si Thammarat in the far south of Thailand – in those days a wild and rough sort of place, though one steeped in ancient history. He reminisces: "I travelled around the country, stayed overnight in temples and lived with the monks. At night, we would talk and they would explain to me local lore and history. It is a good way to learn from the grassroots." Upon graduation from Yale, he was awarded a Yale-China Fellowship to study and teach archaeology in Hong Kong.

During the fellowship of three years, Richard taught archaeology, while mastering the Chinese language. At this time - the early 1970s - the world was entering the computer revolution, and the field of archaeology benefited from scientific and technological advances. Richard quickly adopted computer techniques to create virtual models of reconstructed archaeological sites and to calculate their statistical relevance.

Returning to the United States to do graduate work at Harvard University, Richard pioneered work in the field of "ethno-archaeology" or the study of living communities using the techniques of the archaeologist. His PhD thesis entitled "Post-Pleistocene Maritime Adaptation in the Southeast Asian Archipelago" sets out a computer-aided model to understand the evolu-

tion of maritime adaptation over the past 12,000 years.

When asked to describe the core idea of this thesis, he explains: “At the end of the Pleistocene when the glaciers began to melt and the sea level rose, Southeast Asia became formed anew. Vast areas of low-lying grasslands became flooded, creating a new geography of an archipelago of islands and coastal eco-niches. The people who inhabited this area had to learn to adapt to the new geography, which they gradually did, becoming more and more aware of the potential of marine resources and more adept at exploiting them, through the development of boats, innovations in fishing tackle, and changes in social structures. Although with these technical and social changes, there was also an intellectual development with people becoming expert in knowledge about the sea, about weather and about marine biology. The evolution was rapid – in archaeological time – so much so that we can say that here in Southeast Asia there was a intellectual, economic and social revolution which laid the foundation for the development of complex societies in the region such as Sri Vijaya, Angkor, and Ayutthaya. The significance of this contribution to human development on a global scale can be grasped if we consider that Sri Vijaya controlled a regional trading network larger than ASEAN today, and that both Angkor and Ayutthaya were among the world’s largest cities of their time. It is therefore no surprise that Singapore and Hong Kong are still today at the hub of the world’s trade networks while the region’s cities from Bangkok to Jakarta

and Manila are among the world’s most active urban commercial centres.”

With this academic background, Richard was invited to enter the service of the United Nations. Twenty years later, he recalls that moment: “UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) asked me to put



in UNESCO office

together for the first time a system of registering refugees, computerising and collecting cultural data about them, to understand what kind of person becomes a refugee and what happens to them, and what the international community can do to help them. This procedure, unheard of and innovative at that time has now become standard for UNHCR”.



As a test case, he profiled the backgrounds of two kinds of refugees, the Laotian hill tribe refugees and the Vietnamese boat people.

Today, in his UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Unit for Culture, “we are exploring a hypothesis that there may be cultural factors which predict which people are at risk to exclusion from the development paradigm and thus vulnerable to exploitation and worse. A very good example is HIV-AIDS education. If people don’t go to school, of course, they do not hear the ‘danger of HIV infection’ message, the language of which they don’t speak, thus cannot protect themselves against it. This idea, is far from a resignation implied by pessimistic assumptions of cultural predeterminations of poverty and exploitation. UNESCO will be able to guide the international community to target its assistance to the right people at the right places so that it has a positive impact, one which solves problems, but does so in a culturally appropriate way. Development need not necessarily imply a destruction of the culture, in fact the flourishing of culture is the end goal of all development. It is now popular to say that development must be given a human face. What is that human face? It is the face of culture.”

During his ten years in UNHCR, he did work for the UN Secretariat in Thailand and Cambodia (from 1989 to 1991) and for UNESCO, which he officially joined in 1991. Richard was the first Head of UNESCO Office in Phnom Penh where he launched the international safeguarding campaign for Angkor and shepherded the nomination of Angkor to the World Heritage List, activities for which he was honoured with a knighthood by King Sihanouk. He was then promoted to UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture for Asia and the Pacific. In this role he has reinvented the cultural role of UNESCO in the region, invigorating its actions by giving

priority to community involvement in the preservation of heritage and by emphasizing the primary place of culture as a tool for development. These efforts have been so successful that in addition to his Cambodian knighthood, Richard has been decorated by the governments of Viet Nam, China and the Philippines.

Linking archaeology to political and environmental issues, the archaeologist/advocate says: “With archaeology, one studies environmental issues, such as the extinction of prehistoric megafauna, and inevitably one comes to the conclusion that humankind, in its march through history, has had a profoundly negative effect on the earth’s total environment. The archaeological layers that one studies are all marked by some kind of environmental degradation followed by evidence of a political catastrophe, so in fact the study of archaeology is not only the study of humans in their natural environment, it is also the study of humans in their social environment — an environment which we have ourselves created, for better or for worse.”

For many years, Richard has been studying the transformations of ancient and modern societies in tandem, to understand where we have come from in order to better determine where we are going. As an ethno-archaeologist, the future development of the human race has always been at the centre of his preoccupations. He advocates the idea of “looking at culture and especially the conservation of our heritage resources as a prerequisite for sustainable development, just like the conservation of water, trees and the air is a prerequisite for sustainable development.” These preoccupa-

tions are highly visible in UNESCO projects, such as the LEAP (Local Effort in Asia and the Pacific) which is a programme that integrates community development and cultural and natural site preservation, and allows local communities to take an active role in the management of their heritage as well as the development of tourism-related industries.

Richard remarks that “heritage conservation is becoming an issue of common concern to policymakers and to the public alike across the length and breadth of the Asia-Pacific region.” Many advances in preserving the heritage have taken place, and national and local legislation for heritage protection are now common in the region, thanks to Richard’s constant advocacy. “I never tire” he says “of talking about the need for protecting our common heritage, whether it be at the individual level, the community level, the national level, or the global level. Perhaps some people liken me to a broken record, but my theme song is now one which many people are also singing.”

Heritage conservation has also recently entered the educational curriculum of the region’s school system, where the UNESCO World Heritage Education Resource Kit has become a familiar tool used to teach high school students to respect and appreciate their heritage. More and more of the region’s universities offer degree courses in Cultural Resources Management, linked together in a network call the UNESCO-ICCROM Asian Academy for Conservation Management of Cultural Heritage – another of

Richard’s many innovative ideas to promote professional heritage conservation.

The increase in attention being paid to heritage conservation has also spurred an increase in the support of the private sector for these activities. “If heritage conservation is a tool for development, then it’s got to have a broad base,” says Richard, “I’ve wanted to transform the whole paradigm of heritage conservation in the region from a top-down elitist activity into a bottom-up, grassroots, community-based movement. Now, six years later, I look back on this and I do think that we have succeeded in mobilizing a grassroots concern for conservation as well as a movement

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to professionalize heritage management.” UNESCO’s regional network of heritage conservation personnel working in the region has grown from a mere 45 in 1995, to more than 600 registered professionals today.

But not all problems concerning the safeguarding of the region’s rich cultural heritage have

been solved. Looking at what has been happening in the tourism industry, Richard admits he is “deeply worried about the speed at which tourism is despoiling the region’s cultural – and natural – heritage. When culture is used



as an advertising gimmick and nothing more, the few spoil it for the many. Both the physical heritage and intangible culture are equally at risk of commodification, trivialization and over-use; but what industry can be profitable in the long term if they do not invest in their resource base?” He advises : “We must work very hard for a complete paradigm shift in the tourism industry. The industry must reform itself - or be reformed through public pressure - into a conservation movement to ensure that the cultural and natural resources on which tourism depends are not used up, but are conserved. If not, the region’s precious culture heritage resources will be irreparably degraded, and, with the loss of these resources, cultural tourism, too, will soon become a moribund industry. It should not be such a hard choice to make – either it is win-win or it is lose-lose.”

Richard has also placed many other innovative and forward-looking activities on UNESCO’s agenda for the Asia-Pacific region. Inspired by the success of small business incubators to assist dot.coms and other small-and-medium scale IT company start-ups, the UNESCO small business incubators for cultural industries will demystify the process of business for creative producers and teach them how to set up a culture-based business without the need for

heavy capital investment or administration. The promotion of cultural industries and a large range of creative enterprises is a cornerstone of UNESCO future strategy for the Asia-Pacific region. Architecture, design, fashion, handicraft, film,

television, and other media; the performing arts such as music, dance, and theatre will be promoted; including painting, writing, publishing, and software development, the running of museums, art galleries and concert halls, even tourism. According to the seasoned culture campaigner: “If you look at basic development statistics, you’ll see that the cultural industries have an important role to play in development, but, unlike in some other parts of the world, their contribution to the economies of Asia and the Pacific is negligible, in spite of the fact that the region is home to the richest mosaic of culture in the world: This means that there is a huge potential for growth in the cultural industries in Asia and Pacific. It is an untapped development sector in this part of the world, and knowing that we have tremendous cultural heritage resources here, the conservation of those resources and the



utilisation of that for development is an obvious development strategy which must be vigorously pursued if we are to continue to make headway in the fight against poverty.”

Educated as he was, Richard could have become a conventional scholar, teaching archaeology in a prestigious American university. Instead, he chose another, more difficult path, combining scholarship with service to the developing world. This was a fortunate and happy choice for the cause of heritage conservation and for local community development in Asia and the Pacific. This scholar-diplomat works as he lives - with passion, intelligence and a love for culture.

“What I did not want to be was a dusty historian, spending the rest of my life confined inside libraries. I wanted to be outside, doing things, seeing the things I do have an impact on society,” he says.



Katell Guiziou

All photos by Nipon Sud-Ngam

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia introduces many traditional forms of theatre that are not widely known outside their countries of origin. Edited by Dr Chua Soo Pong, Currently the Director of the Chinese Opera Institute in Singapore, the book discusses how traditional forms of theatre should be revitalised in the rapidly changing socio-economic environments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia (US\$ 10 excluding postage cost) can be obtained from:

Regional Centre for Archaeology
and Fine Arts
SPAFA
81/1 Sri Ayutthaya Road
Samsen, Theves
Bangkok 10300, Thailand
Tel : (66-2) 2804022-9
Fax : (66-2) 2804030
Email : spafa@ksc.th.com



